

The Origins of The Roeper School

George Roeper and Annemarie Bondy arrived in the United States on the eve of World War II, grateful to be alive. Annemarie, only 20 years old, was a German girl of Jewish heritage who had twice escaped the Nazis, thanks largely to George's courage and astuteness in reading political conditions. George, a 28-year-old German graduate student was not Jewish but, because he helped the Bondys to leave the country, had to flee to escape summary execution by the Nazi authorities.

George had come to America in November 1938 to find a property where he, his fiancé Annemarie, and Annemarie's parents, Max and Gertrud Bondy, could establish a school and begin to build a new life in America. After years of losses and fear, the family could finally glimpse a secure future.

Education was the logical choice for this idealistic, erudite family. Max and Gertrud had founded a successful boarding school in Germany in 1920 that was a radical alternative to the rigid, authoritarian schools that made up the German educational mainstream. George and Annemarie had both been educated in this idyllic setting.

But if education was the family's most practical choice for making a living, it was also a passionately held mission, for they had all been rocked to the core by the speed and ferocity of the transformation of Germany under Adolf Hitler. How could a people of such intellectual and cultural attainments as the Germans embrace the Nazi agenda so quickly and so completely? It's a question that still baffles us, but in 1939 it was a soul-shaking conundrum for the Bondys and George Roeper. The Germans were willing to upend their civic and judicial institutions, accept censorship and propaganda,



Schule Marienau, Max and Gertrud Bondy's boarding school where George and Annemarie were educated.

demonize Jews and other minorities, and surrender their own rights of free speech and assembly and movement.

The family felt compelled to commit their lives to educating children so they would not grow up to become Nazis or acquiesce to fascism. They believed that an education that fails to teach children to think and speak for themselves, to recognize the humanity of those about them, to be able

to analyze and interpret events and policies clearly and compassionately leaves them vulnerable to demagogues. At Marienau, their school in Germany, Max and Gertrud had been able to teach children these crucial skills, and they were eager to continue their work in the United States.

A number of elements were critical to Max and Gertrud's educational philosophy, but the most important was the belief that a school must nurture the social and emotional development of its students. Western education at the time was primarily focused on the transfer of skills and facts, ensuring that students had read the accepted canon, knew the appropriate cultural referents, and acquired the vocational skills they needed for work. If social development was considered, it was primarily to ensure that students learned to shape their behavior to conform to the social norms for their class. In Germany, there was a particular emphasis on unquestioning obedience to authority.



Max and Gertrud Bondy, late 1940s

Max and Gertrud had already rejected these ideas. Gertrud was interested in the integration of intellect and emotion because she was a medical doctor and psychoanalyst who had trained with Sigmund Freud, one of the first women to reach either of these milestones. Rather than using psychoanalysis therapeutically for

adults, Gertrud was interested in applying Freud's insights, such as the role of the unconscious, the use of sublimation and the development of sexual identity, to child development to create an environment that would support healthy psychological and moral growth.

For his part, Max had been shaped by his experiences with the German Youth Movement, the small but influential social movement that arose early in the 20th century among young upper-middle-class Germans. Rebelling against the industrial, authoritarian culture, young Germans formed small groups that hiked, wrote poetry, and developed close, emotionally open friendships. Their politics varied widely, but at the movement's sole gathering, they articulated their common aspiration: "The free German youth want to shape their lives according to their own decision, on their own responsibility, and guided by their own inner truth."

Gertrud's passion for the individual and Max's passion for community made an ideal pairing. Together they founded a school where students could pursue the fundamental task of being human: to come to understand themselves and how they fit into the world. They did this by creating a caring community in which the teachers and the students were respected as individuals and treated each other as equals. Democracy was critical: everyone participated in a governing council that voted on all decisions, from admissions to policy changes. There was a constantly articulated commitment to justice and to making the world a better place. The academic schedule was rigorous and focused on the future and the possibility of change. Drama, art, music, and dance were highly valued, and frequent community festivals celebrated everything from harvest-time to Max's birthday. Physical activity and pleasure in natural beauty were integral, with skiing and hiking, swimming and calisthenics. And throughout it all, Max and Gertrud moved as beloved and engaged "parents," dispensing affection, understanding and inspiration.

To Max and Gertrud, such an education yielded adults of character and independence who would not seek a sense of purpose in blind ideologies and could resist demagogues such as Adolf Hitler. Having lost their home, livelihood and all their money, Max and Gertrud were determined to begin again in the United States to educate students who, in Max's words, "can think for themselves but feel with the community."



The school was located at 668 Pallister Avenue, Detroit, from 1942-1946.

By the time the Bondys arrived in New York, George had managed to locate property in Vermont where the family opened the Windsor Mountain School in the fall of 1939. By 1941, George and Annemarie, who had married shortly after arriving in this country, were looking for a place to make their own mark. Annemarie was asked to direct a nursery founded by a prominent psychoanalyst and family friend, Editha Sterba. Editha had founded a psychoanalytically

oriented nursery school in Detroit and asked Annemarie to come take charge of it, while George would start an elementary program.

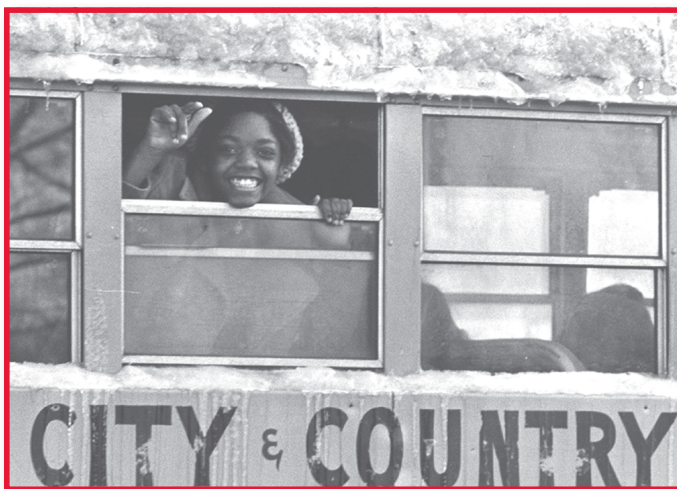
So in the fall of 1941, George and Annemarie came to Detroit and moved into the large, two-story house at 12024 Woodward Avenue in Highland Park where Editha had the nursery. They started the year with six students in the nursery and three in the new Roeper Grade School and ended the year with 30 students. In the fall of 1942, they moved to larger quarters at 668 Pallister Avenue, in the New Center area of Detroit. Enrollment continued to grow. In 1945 they rented additional space but still had a waiting list of 50 students. In spring of 1946, they bought the Stephens mansion, Coventry Crest, and the surrounding property on Woodward Avenue in Bloomfield Hills, which at that time was well out in the country. They refurbished the mansion over the summer to accommodate both the school and living quarters for themselves and opened in the fall of 1946 with 90 students, from Nursery through Grade 6, in its new location and with a new name: City and Country School of Bloomfield Hills.



In the spring of 1946 George and Annemarie purchased and renovated Coventry Crest, and it became City and Country School of Bloomfield Hills.

Their educational approach was rooted in the psychoanalytic orientation of their own upbringing. They believed that a strong sense of emotional security was the foundation of all learning and development, and that children needed to be understood as individuals if their emotional needs were going to be properly nurtured. A Freudian perspective guided their understanding of children's behavior, looking for motives in family dynamics, personality and unconscious reactions. Only by understanding why a child was doing something was it possible to guide their behavior wisely. They gave children respectful, intelligent attention, and offered a discovery-based education, so children could explore ideas and objects on their own, cultivating their innate curiosity and independence.

George and Annemarie's philosophy, as well as their reassuring and good-humored calmness, had enormous appeal for both children and parents. In postwar Detroit, a thriving, forward-looking city propelled by the booming auto industry and a sophisticated community of psychoanalysts, artists and intellectuals, they quickly became well-known and well-regarded.



In the early 1950s, City and Country became the first independent school in Michigan to be integrated.

As the school's enrollment steadily grew, George and Annemarie expanded the practice of their philosophy. Their abhorrence of injustice led them to integrate the school in the early 1950s, the first private school to do so in Michigan. They were early adopters of the Open Classroom method as a means of giving students a more individualized education. They democratized the school, bringing faculty and students into the decision-making process.

A significant change came in 1956 when George and Annemarie decided to make City and Country one of the nation's first schools devoted to gifted children.

There was widespread interest in gifted children at the time, largely driven by Cold War anxiety about falling behind the Soviets. The Roepers believed that gifted children were not well understood and wanted to make sure that these children were given the chance to fulfill their own potential — not the agenda of a nation. Their approach to gifted education has had a major impact on the field, leading educators to recognize that the complex emotional lives of gifted children defines them as much as their cognitive abilities. Today The Roeper School is the oldest independent school for gifted children in the country.

Annemarie and George always said theirs was a "philosophy of life," not just of education. They wanted their students to come to understand themselves and to understand the ways they were connected to the rest of the world, a model they called *Self-Actualization and Interdependence*. They assumed their students would go on to college or pursue other passions, but never thought those goals constituted a whole life. They constantly urged their students to consider the effects of their behavior, to be engaged in the larger world, and to value justice over power.

At the same time, they also wanted their students to enjoy life, to appreciate beauty and to laugh. Art, dance, music and drama were integral parts of school life. Kindergarten children gathered and arranged flowers for receptions, and students danced, sang and performed at school celebrations. World-renowned musicians from universities in the area performed on special occasions, and impromptu dance, music, drama and debate broke out regularly.



"If education, at its ideal, is supposed to be a joyous experience, it probably comes as close to that realization at Roeper City and Country as at any school in our experience," said the team of independent school and university teachers and administrators in the school's first accreditation report in 1974. "It is obvious from one's first entrance to the School, in the good humor, openness, friendliness, the good relations



between people and the relaxed atmosphere that Roeper is a community which feels good about and enjoys itself."

Naturally, in any community built on ideals, reality sometimes falls short. When new ideas are always being explored, the implementation is sometimes less than perfect, or even less than good, on occasion. And any educational system rooted in discovery, in which the point is to try, to reflect, to learn, and to try again, can look rather messy at times along the way.

George and Annemarie sought to create "a world in miniature" at their school: a world that reflected not only the racial and cultural diversity of the larger world, but also the wonder, the failures, the confusion, the richness, the moral conundrums, the flashes of genius, the thrill of solitary discovery and the profound satisfaction of a successful group achievement. They wanted to create a safe place where students could explore all aspects of their lives, with the watchful attention and assistance of sympathetic adults who understand that each child needs the freedom to figure out his or her own path through life and how to be a constructive member of a caring community.

"Our school tries to develop a person who will be able to cope with the modern world, enjoy as many facets of it as possible and contribute to it actively, constructively and creatively. This requires a person who is emotionally secure, aware of his own abilities and his place in a large, complicated and ever-changing world, a person who reacts in a flexible, broadminded and intelligent manner to the whole complexity of modern life, and who is able to communicate his thoughts and feelings," they wrote in the early 1960s.

By this means, they hoped to achieve the somber goal that underlay their lives — to avenge the harm done by the Nazis by founding a school, and hopefully shaping the larger field of education, to educate children to become self-aware, tolerant and compassionate adults who would resist demagoguery and feel compelled to

find ways to make the world a better place. Although the Roepers' names and philosophy are closely attached to gifted education (and their approach is particularly suitable for gifted children, with their fierce desire to control their own education), George and Annemarie always considered their philosophy universal, and the ideal education for all children.

Their history and seriousness of purpose gave them a gravitas that garnered respect, but it was by no means their central animating feature, which was a pure love of children. Annemarie and George delighted in watching children, listening to them, enjoying their variety and observing the recurring yet individual pattern of a child coming into his or her own. For them, to educate children was to participate in the eternal rebirth of the world, as each child arrived with his or her own unique potential that gradually unfolded and developed. They were passionate about offering a setting where those children could become the people they were meant to be. As Heads of a school that ran from nursery through high school, they felt deeply fortunate to be able to watch children mature over many years.

George and Annemarie led The Roeper School for almost 40 years. George retired in 1979 and Annemarie in 1980.



Annemarie and George Roeper, 1969

They took some time to travel and spend more time with family, but they also continued their political activism for issues of justice, particularly nuclear disarmament and human rights, and they continued to contribute to the field of gifted education. George died on August 24, 1992, at the age of 81. Annemarie continued to work for many years, still working with and writing about children, but, given her eternal fascination with human development, also thinking and writing about life "beyond old." She passed away on May 11, 2012, at the age of 93.

George and Annemarie's vision continues to inspire the school to provide a safe and loving environment for children to explore the world, discover their own strengths and passions, and establish a firm foundation for a lifetime of learning and engagement. ♦